

The Builder.

No. CCCVI.

SATURDAY, DECEMBER 16, 1846.



His opinion that modern feelings, purposes, and wants, are to be made subservient, in the erection of modern buildings, to adherence to an ancient model,—that we should not express our own aspirations, but mould or affect feelings and views to suit ancient utterances,—that we should copy instead of think,—that instead of endeavouring to produce the best building for our purpose, with the best materials at command, we should make the best possible imitation of some preceding work, produced, though it may have been, under entirely different circumstances,—is, we are happy to say, becoming loosened, and, there is little doubt, will gradually be given up. Mr. Fergusson's new work, his "Historical Inquiry into the true principles of Beauty in Art, more especially with reference to Architecture,"* will do much to hasten this; and, by so doing, to restore architecture to its proper position as a fine art amongst us. A general notion of the tendency of this book has been already given in our pages: it wars with prejudices; answers the question we have so often put—"Are architects only to copy?" with a smile of wondering contempt for the deep absurdity of such an inquiry; pooh poohs symbolism; disbelieves both classical and mediæval perfection; condemns the miserable mis-education of the upper classes; and maintains that, as a consequence of this, there is not that he is aware of "one single individual in the upper ranks of society who really knows what art is, or is seriously anxious for its advancement!" It is a bold book, a very bold book, but withal is written in a humble spirit, and so earnestly that the reader can scarce do other than attend and respect, however much he may dissent or be startled. Seeing our superior standard of morality as compared with that of the Greeks; that our religion is nobler and purer; the extent and solidity of our phonetic knowledge, and other higher and purer sources of inspiration than former ages had any suspicion of, it pains the author—the reader can see it pains him—to find them cast aside, unused for the noble purposes they are so well fitted to promote, and their place supplied by mockeries and absurdities which degrade the name of art, and lead men to believe that it is only a hollow bauble, or a pandor to our lower sensual propensities. The true object of art is to teach, to elevate, to win man to goodness, to bring him nearer to divinity,—and not simply to provide amusement for barren minds.

To rescue our arts from their present state (our author takes even a worse view of them than we do), is the writer's aim, and the principal points to which he wishes to direct attention are these:—

"The first is to restore to art its progressive vitality, or, in other words, to give up all imitation of past styles (?), and to start at once with the determination to surpass all that has hitherto been done, and to progress towards a degree of perfection that has not hitherto been reached.

The second is to enlist a higher order of minds in their practice, or at least a higher class in society than has hitherto condescended to interfere with them.

The third is to fit them with some higher aim than merely to please the dilettante or the connoisseur; for they must teach and elevate, or themselves suffer degradation." This, however, is taking our readers too suddenly into the middle of the book; we should first give them the author's general intentions, and for these we must turn back to the preface.

The work when completed will have three parts. Part I., which alone forms the large and handsome volume now published, consists of an introduction (involving the whole gist), an Essay on Egyptian art; on Western Asiatic art; on Grecian art; on Etruscan art; and finally, on Roman art; and is illustrated by five plates and ninety-nine woodcuts.

Part II. is intended to contain Essays on Eastern Asiatic art, Mahomedan art, Byzantine art, and Gothic art, up to the Reformation. The third part is to consist, first of "a history of the monkey styles of modern Europe, from the time when men first began to copy, instead of thinking, 'till the present time, when they have ceased to think, and can only copy—including all the variations of that strange art, from Seville and Sicily, to Stockholm and St. Petersburg, together with a critique on the modern schools of art; and lastly, practical suggestions for their improvement."

At the "monkey" styles, although their connected history is left for the last part, the writer constantly glances throughout the present volume. Thus, in speaking of the amount of true history given us by the temples of Egypt or Greece, or our Gothic cathedrals, he says,—

"The buildings and works of art of a people are produced by themselves to tell their own tale, and neither are nor can be falsified by time or the errors of copyists, but stand as left by those that made them, with the undying impress of their aspirations or their shortcomings stamped by themselves in characters of adamant. We may not even now be aware of their importance in this light, because our system differs so totally from theirs, and few can get so thoroughly out of the prejudices of the present age, as to be able to look with different eyes on the past. If, for instance, a philosophical historian were to go into one of our modern towns, and attempt to apply the same rules of art to them, he would in one corner find an edifice that would convince him of our direct and unadulterated descent from the Greeks; a little further on he would find that at least a large class exhibited as pure a descent from ancient Rome; a little further on he would find a large building in course of construction that shewed no trace of these races or styles, but proved us to be true Britons, only that we had remained perfectly stationary since the fourteenth century; and this again would be corrected by finding according to another building we had not progressed since the twelfth century: in another street he would discover that we were Egyptians, Chinese, Turks, or Heaven knows what. No rule of true art will apply to ours. Yet there is history built into the walls of our edifices, as well as into those of antiquity; but it is the history of a nation that neglected all the true forms of the beautiful, and were earnest only in the pursuit of the most literal utilitarian utter-

ances, and who were in consequence content to imitate, like monkeys, without understanding what they were doing, or why they did it, what men, using their intellect as such, had elaborated, with half our means, out of the rudest materials."

If artists once felt the degradation inherent on their present servility of copying, and were emancipated from this thralldom, he has little fear of the arts attracting a higher class of intellect than has hitherto been applied to their cultivation, and then that earnest search after the beautiful by men of a high class of intellect, could not long be carried on without the discovery being made of the direction in which it is to be sought after, and where it certainly would be found by those who seek it in truth. What is wanted is poetry in the mind of the artist,—poetry with which to invest the merely utilitarian, using the latter word in the confined and vulgar sense of the day, which blindly sees not the usefulness of beauty.

From those who insist on the depressing influence of the "reformation" on art, Mr. Fergusson differs wholly. "I have the strongest faith," he says, "in the common sense of the Anglo-Saxon race, and in their power to excel in art, as they have done in everything else which they have tried in earnest. And I have a still sterner and stronger belief in the superiority of honest Protestant Christianity, as compared either with Pagan classicity, or mediæval Romanticism, and cannot for one instant doubt the triumph of the former when it puts forth its strength."

He thinks that if the present race of architects were only freed from the trammels of a false system, they could easily do more than their forefathers ever did: they surpass them in knowledge, education, and refinement, "but they are now groping about blindfold, and attempting impossibilities, of course only to fail. To me," he says, "they seem like men fishing for stars, whose reflection they see in the stagnant waters of a former world." How they "got into so wrong a path, or can hug so absurd a mania," would be unaccountable, the writer thinks, "did we not know how all-powerful such an extended organization as that of the English universities and the schools under their charge and influence is, and must be, for the mis-education of the upper and most influential classes of the nation. It has been so effectual, that it has not only served to extinguish almost every race of native and progressive fine arts, and to endow us with a revival of a fossil and exotic one, totally at variance with our wants and purposes, but it has completely blinded us to what the true processes of art are, and the modes in which they should be cultivated; and till we know at least what the tools and processes are with which we are to work, it is indeed vain to hope that we can effect anything worthy of us."

Our author, in his anxiety to destroy the precedent-rule, and to shew the miserable state to which it has brought our art, goes further than can be justified, and overlooks much that is gradually going on amongst us. "To give up all imitation of past styles," for example, as he urges, would be to throw away from us the result of accumulated efforts, and to go back to the primitive hut-builders. The history of architecture is that of a continuous progress, the first step helping to the second, the second to the third. The altar built by Moses with the twelve stones about it, needed little elaboration to result in the temples of the Egyptians. The works of the latter people were

* Part the First. Published by Longman, Brown, Green, and Longman, Paternoster-row, 1846.